

## Whither *New Atheism*?

According to Tom Flynn (2012):

There's nothing new about the New Atheism. ... Readers familiar with nineteenth- and twentieth-century freethought literature ... knew that everything the [New Atheists] were being praised and condemned for had been done before. Well. Many times. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, articulate writers had declared religion untrue, faith a social evil, and the archetypal stories told by the world's great creeds nothing but clumsy legends. ... The triumph of Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens was to take arguments against religion that were long familiar to insiders, brilliantly repackage them, and expose them to millions who would never otherwise pick up an atheist book. That's no small achievement.

I think that this assessment is mostly—but perhaps not entirely—right. On the one hand, while much that the New Atheists say repeats things that have been said in the past, there are some new elements in the brew. On the other hand, the 'triumph' of the New Atheists repeats similar 'triumphs' from the past, episodes in which wider dissemination of related literature provoked howls of protest.

In order to give a proper estimation of the place of the New Atheism in history, we shall need to have before us an overview of that history. So I shall begin with an appropriate sketch. Then I will try to give an account of the current global state of play, and to indicate some reasons why it seems reasonable to think that the worldview of the New Atheists is currently gaining ground, at least in certain quarters. After examining—and rejecting—some recent claims that the worldview of the New Atheists is actually now in decline, I will then conclude with some cautionary remarks about the difficulties of making longer term predictions about anything involving human affairs.

### 1. History

There are several elements that are common to the worldviews of the New Atheists. In particular, it is important to note that they are (i) atheists; (ii) naturalists; and (iii) irreligionists. As *atheists*, they believe that there are no gods: no supernatural beings or forces that have and exercise power over the natural world without themselves being subject to the exercise of power of other beings or forces. As *naturalists*, they believe that there are none but natural causal entities possessing none but natural causal powers. As *irreligionists*, they reject all forms of religion, often regarding them all as social evils.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> As the editors pointed out to me, there is some question about whether, for example, Sam Harris is an irreligionist, given his endorsement of Buddhist meditative techniques. While I would be happy enough to qualify my claim so that it says only that, *by and large*, the New Atheists are atheists, naturalists, and irreligionists, it seems to me most likely that Harris thinks that the useful meditative practices can simply be hived off from the rest of the Buddhist religion. Note that to be an irreligionist, one need only reject all religions for oneself; it is a further step—taken by the New Atheists, but not by some other contemporary atheists—to suppose that everyone else ought also to reject religion.

In Western Europe, in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, accusation of “atheism” was a serious matter. Some people were executed for being “atheists”—e.g. Étienne Dolet (1509-46) and Lucilio Vanini (1585-1619)—and more suffered under the attribution of this label—e.g. Christopher Marlowe (1563-93), and countless others. Nonetheless, given the turmoil that engulfed Europe between the inception of Lutheranism at Wittenberg in 1519 and the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is hard to identify even one clear case of either atheism or irreligion in “educated” society in the sixteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

The conditions that created the need for the Treaty of Westphalia also called for new ways of thinking about doctrinal conflicts within Christendom, and about doctrinal conflicts with other religions. At least from the publication of Herbert of Cherbury’s *De Veritate* (1624), deism appeared well-motivated as a response to the carnage of the sixteenth century, and it became a fixed presence in “educated” society at least until the latter decades of the eighteenth century. For some, deism was a “purified” version of Christianity, omitting the miracles, the prophecies, and all aspects of the divinity of Christ. For others, deism was not any kind of Christianity, but the life and moral teachings of Jesus remained exemplary. And, for yet others, Christianity was dismissed in its entirety. Of course, it is important to note that deists were neither atheists nor naturalists; and, it is also important to note that the appearance of deists who were irreligionists was a comparatively late development. It is also noteworthy that there *were* atheists in the seventeenth century, though their continued existence was imperilled if they made public declaration of their beliefs: to take just one example, Kazimierz Łyszczyński, author of a treatise entitled *The Non-Existence of God*, was executed in 1689 for denying the existence of God and blaspheming important figures in the history of Christianity.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, there may have been some atheists who were opposed to religion. Whereas Voltaire (1694-1778) was a deist who continued to engage in Christian worship, his follower Diderot (1713-1784) was certainly an atheist and an opponent of Christianity. However, in the face of considerable pressure from authorities, even Diderot was very restrained in publishing his beliefs. Similarly, Hume (1711-76) did not publish his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, perhaps because he was worried about giving offence to received opinion, but also perhaps because he was unsure whether religion might have a useful role in regulating social order.

However, the times were a-changing. In 1761, Paul-Henri Holbach published *Christianity Unveiled*—one of a number of openly atheistic and irreligious works that appeared around this time (though always written under pseudonyms). From the 1770s onwards, it became less

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<sup>2</sup> For support for the claims in this paragraph, and in the following four, see, for example: Berman (1988), Thrower (2000), Flynn (2007), and Oppy and Trakakis (2009).

dangerous—personally and professionally—for atheists and irreligionists to publish their views. And then, with the events of the French Revolution—and, in particular, the activities of Jacques Herbert (1757-1794) and Pierre Gaspard Chaumette (1763-1794) in connection with the Cult of Reason—a significant additional step was taken. Chaumette, in particular, was *openly* scathing: Christians are enemies of reason, their ideas are ridiculous ...

Thomas Paine (1794, 1795, 1807) took existing irreligious deist ideas, and expounded them in a common style that made his works accessible to a very broad public. By the standards of the age, the first two volumes of *The Age of Reason* sold in bucket loads. Moreover, these volumes provoked public responses that, in turn, were searching for a similarly broad audience, e.g. Watson (1796)—“I hope that there is no want of charity in saying that it would have been fortunate for the Christian world had your life been terminated before you had fulfilled your intention” (2)—and private correspondence, such as the following extract from a letter from John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, that also ran at temperature:

I am willing you should call this ... anything but the Age of Reason. ... For such a mongrel between pig and puppy, begotten by a wild boar on a bitch wolf, never before in any age of the world was suffered by the poltroonery of mankind, to run through such a career of mischief. Call it the Age of Paine. (Ford (1927), cited in Hawke (1974).)

From here, our story grows even more interesting. In the nineteenth century, on the one hand, there are the well known academic contributions to the development of atheism and irreligion: Feuerbach, Marx and Engels, Darwin, Clifford, Nietzsche, Freud, Durkheim, and so forth. And, on the other hand, there are the many popular writers who had strong claims to make against Christianity and other religions. Consider, for example, Robert Ingersoll, in his essay “The Gods” (1872):

The trouble is, these pious people shut up their reason, and then open their Bible (33)

We have listened to all the drowsy, idealess, vapid sermons that we wish to hear. ... All these amount to less than nothing. ... It is worse than useless to show us fishes with money in their mouths, and call our attention to vast multitudes stuffing themselves with five crackers and two sardines. (52)

To prevent famine, one plan is worth a million sermons, and even patent medicines will cure more diseases than all the prayers uttered since the beginning of the world. (61)

The originality of repetition, and the mental vigour of acquiescence, are all that we have any right to expect from the Christian world (63)

Basking in the sunshine of a delusion ... the world was filled with ignorance, superstition and misery. (65)

The civilisation of man has increased just to the same extent that religious power has decreased. (78)

Consider George Foote who, in his book *Prisoner for Blasphemy* (1886) explained that *The Freethinker* was launched with the avowed object of waging:

... relentless war against Superstition in general, and the Christian Superstition in particular. (7)

Consider Charles Bradlaugh, in his essay “Humanity’s Gain from Unbelief” (1889):

The men who advocated [abolition of slavery] were imprisoned, racked and burned, so long as the Church was strong enough to be merciless. (3)

Consider Matilda Joslyn Gage, in her book, *Woman, Church and State* (1893):

The careful student of history will discover that Christianity has been of very little value in advancing civilisation, but has done a great deal toward retarding it (69)

Throughout the twentieth century, there were many authors making similar kinds of claims. Perhaps we might start with Chapman Cohen:

The cause for speculation is not what will happen to the world when religion dies out, but how human society has managed to flourish while the belief in gods has ruled (*Theism or Atheism*, 1921)

Gods are fragile things; they may be killed by a whiff of science or a dose of commonsense (“The Devil”, in *Essays in Freethinking*)

Freethought has had to run the gauntlet of the biting Christian, the barking Christian, and the snivelling Christian (“The Happy Atheist”, in *Essays in Freethinking*)

Or we could look at Joseph Lewis:

The history of religious persecution and torture is the horror of the world (*The Tyranny of God*, 1921, 39)

The Bible is a lie. It is a fake and a fraud. I denounce this book and its God. I hold it in utter detestation. (*An Atheist Manifesto*, 1954)

Or we could consider the writings of countless others, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Joseph McCabe, Emmanuel Haldemann-Julius, Bertrand Russell, and Paul Kurtz.

Even our hopelessly brief and superficial sampling reveals that, from the Age of Paine, there has been a long and continuous history of criticism of religion—and, in particular, Christian religion—replete with the kinds of claims that grace the pages of the works of the New Atheists. At various stages in that history, particular writers—e.g., Paine, Ingersoll, and Russell—have reached very wide audiences, and have engaged in very robust disputes with those whom they have chosen to attack, using the same kinds of rhetorical tropes and devices that are the stock-in-trade of the New Atheists. Moreover, the content of the arguments offered by those earlier writers is often quite similar to the content of the arguments that the New Atheists offer.

Of course, this is not to say that the New Atheists merely repeat what has been said before. More recent authors have always had available to them a much greater stock of knowledge—about physics, and biology, and archaeology, and the contents of ancient texts, and so on—than was available to earlier authors; and more recent authors also have access to the fruit of fields of study that had not even been broached in earlier times: consider, for example, what Atran (2002:vii) calls the ‘convergence of evolutionary biology and cognitive psychology’ that underpins much recent (atheistic and naturalistic) theorising about religion. Moreover, the targets for atheists and naturalists are not stationary: succeeding generations of apologists for supernaturalism and theism have appealed to very different kinds of considerations in the construction of their apologies. But, while the detail of the writings of atheists and naturalists is in constant flux, there is, nonetheless, a clear line of descent from Paine (1794) to Dawkins (2006) and beyond.

Should we join Flynn in saying that there’s *nothing* new about the New Atheism? I don’t think so. The New Atheism is ‘new’ simply because it represents one distinctive *current* expression of atheism and naturalism. That it is the continuation of a long-established practice does not mean that it should not be called ‘new’. Of course, in the longer term, on the assumption that there continues to be this kind of expression of atheism and naturalism, ‘New Atheism’ will cease to be a useful label: but that an expression is likely to have a short shelf-life is not a reason for ceasing to use it.

## 2. State of Play

Given that the New Atheism is really just *one* contemporary expression of atheism and naturalism—and given that the main difference between it and other contemporary expressions of atheism and naturalism concerns attitudes about the rationality of entertaining opposing worldviews—it is reasonable to construe questions about the likely future of New Atheism as questions about the likely future of atheism and naturalism. After all, it seems reasonable to predict that, if the underlying beliefs—the underlying metaphysical and ontological commitments that are common to all worldviews that are atheistic and naturalistic—are held, then, among those who hold the relevant beliefs, there will be a distribution over different degrees of hostility towards worldviews that do not endorse those

underlying beliefs (and there will also be a distribution over different degrees of hostility towards religion and religious belief).<sup>3</sup>

There are various different questions that arise. How *is* atheism and naturalism currently faring in the population at large? How *is* it faring in the academy (and, in particular, in departments of philosophy)? How *ought* atheism and naturalism to be faring in these different places?

Reliable global data about atheism, naturalism and irreligion is not easy to obtain. Surveys designed to obtain this data often have low response rates, rely upon non-random sampling from populations, use terms whose interpretation is contested or unclear, and face questions about the honesty of responses.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, there is a pretty clear picture that emerges from data that has been collected over the past fifty years. Throughout much of the world—with the major exception of the United States—there is a correlation between measures of religiosity and national wealth: countries with higher gross domestic product per capita typically exhibit lower levels of religiosity. Moreover, across most countries with higher gross domestic product per capita, there have been steady declines in religious affiliation and religiosity, and steady increases in atheism and agnosticism, over a period of many decades.<sup>5</sup>

Consider the most recent Pew Survey in the United States.<sup>6</sup> In the period from 2007 to 2012, the percentage of self-declared atheists in the US has risen from 1.6% to 2.4%; the percentage of self-declared agnostics in the US has risen from 2.1% to 3.3%; the percentage of ‘nothing in particulars’ in the US has risen from 11.6% to 13.9%; and the percentage of ‘religiously unaffiliated’ in the US has risen from 38% to 49%. Overall, the percentage of ‘nones’ – atheists, agnostics, and ‘nothing in particulars’ – in the US has risen from 15.3% to 19.6%.

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<sup>3</sup> Just to be clear: I am not claiming that the New Atheism is the most prevalent, or the most prominent, form of contemporary atheism and naturalism (though I am also not denying this claim). My claim is that there has always been a range of attitudes that atheists and naturalists have taken towards those who disagree with them: the New Atheists are the current crop of those who opt for public confrontation, accusations of irrationality, disparagement of religion, and so forth. However, when it comes to central ontological and metaphysical beliefs, New Atheists hold the same kinds of beliefs as others who are atheists and naturalists.

<sup>4</sup> Zuckermann (2007) provides a good discussion of some of these pit-falls, along with an assessment of the data to 2007.

<sup>5</sup> See Norris and Inglehart (2004). For a slightly more complex conjecture, see: Rees, T. (2012) ‘Who needs God? Why is Religion on the rise in so many Countries?’ *Humanists4Science* <http://humanists4science.blogspot.com.au/2010/01/why-is-religion-on-rise-in-so-many.html>

<sup>6</sup> *The Global Religious Landscape: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Major Religious Groups as of 2010* (<http://www.pewforum.org/global-religious-landscape-exec.aspx>)

In this period, there has been an increase in the percentage who say that they rarely, if ever, attend religious services (from 27% to 29%); a decrease in the percentage who say they never doubt the existence of God (down to 80%); and a decrease in the percentage who say that religion is important in their lives (from 61% to 58%). Overwhelmingly, self-declared atheists and agnostics view religion's declining influence on society as a good thing, whereas 'nothing in particulars' are more divided on this matter. Moreover, atheists and agnostics in the US score higher on socioeconomic measures than either the 'nothing in particulars' or the public at large. 44% of atheists and agnostics have college degrees, compared to 26% of the 'nothings in particular', and 28% of the public at large; and 38% of atheists and agnostics have an annual income above US\$75,000, compared to 29% of the public at large.

Consider the census data for Australia.<sup>7</sup> In the period from 2006 to 2011, the percentage of people with no religious affiliation rose from 18.7% to 22.3% (and the percentage of those who gave either a null or inadequate response to the question fell from 11.9% to 9.4%). The census data does not provide a breakdown for atheism and agnosticism. The 2009 ISSP survey reported in Hughes (2010) found that, of those who claim to have no religious affiliation, 33% are atheists and 25% are agnostics. This survey reported that 30% of Australians did not follow a religion and did not consider themselves to be spiritual, and a further 13% would not say whether they were spiritual and/or a follower of a religion. There is quite a discrepancy in reported levels of religious affiliation between the census and the ISSP survey; but, if the rates of atheism and agnosticism reported in the ISSP survey are applied to the census data, we find that, in the period from 2006 to 2011, the percentage of atheists increased from 6.2% to 7.4%, the percentage of agnostics increased from 4.6% to 5.6%, and the percentage of 'nothing in particulars' fell from 9.9% to 9.6%. Even if this calculation is unreliable, there is no doubt that, as in the US, the percentage of atheists and agnostics continues to grow, and to grow more rapidly than almost any group that does have religious affiliation. (The percentage of those reporting no religious affiliation in Australia was 12.7% in 1986, and 16.6% in 1996; the percentage of those who gave either a null or inadequate response to the question was 12.3% in 1986, and 9.0% in 1996. Using the same method of estimation as above, in 1986 the percentage of atheists was 4.2% and the percentage of agnostics was 3.2%; and, in 1996, the percentage of atheists was 5.5% and the percentage of agnostics was 4.1%.)

The patterns observed in the US and Australia are repeated in most countries with higher gross domestic product per capita, but not in countries with lower gross domestic product per capita.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as Zuckerman (2007) observes, it may be that, as a percentage of global population, atheism and agnosticism are actually in decline, because birth rates are much higher in highly religious populations than in highly irreligious populations. Thus, while there

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<sup>7</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics: Census

2011 <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/census?opendocument&navpos=10>

<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.nationmaster.com/index.php>

is evidence that the kinds of worldviews espoused by the New Atheists has been gaining ground in what Zuckerman calls ‘advanced industrial nations’, there is also reason to suspect that those kinds of worldviews have been globally losing ground.

Reliable data about how atheism, naturalism and irreligion are faring in academic circles is also not easy to obtain. Here, I begin with some data from the 2009 PhilPapers Survey and Metasurvey conducted by Chalmers and Bourget.<sup>9</sup> 931 philosophers in 99 “leading” programs—including 86 in English-speaking countries—were surveyed. Of those surveyed, 72.8% were atheists, with 61.9% accepting atheism, and 11.0% leaning towards atheism; 14.6% were theists, with 10.6% accepting theism, and 4.0% leaning towards theism; and 12% classified themselves as “other”, including 5.5% who classified themselves as agnostics or undecided. Interestingly, of those who claimed specialist expertise in philosophy of religion, only 20.9% were atheists; but 86.8% of philosophers who did not profess specialist expertise in philosophy of religion were atheists. Moreover, these results are largely as the participants in the initial survey expected that they would be: the philosophers who participated in the metasurvey “expected” 76% of philosophers to be atheists. (Smith (2001:197) records that the ‘exceptionless, educated guesses of every atheist and theist philosophy professor I have asked’ is that between one in three and one in four professional philosophers in the United States is a theist.)

There is, of course, quite a bit of data about the distribution of religious beliefs in the (secular) academy at large. It has been true for at least a century that there is an over-representation of atheists, naturalists and irreligionists in the (secular) academy, relative to the population at large. Some have suggested that the percentages here have not changed much with the passage of time—but, as more generally, it is hard to be sure that there is reliable data to support this kind of contention. What is clearly true is that atheists currently greatly outnumber theists everywhere in the (secular) academy.

There are some who claim that the (secular) academy has undergone dramatic changes in the past thirty years. In particular, there are some who claim that philosophy has seen a revolution that is gradually spreading to the rest of the (secular) academy. Consider, for example, Craig and Moreland (2009: ix):

The face of Anglo-American philosophy has been transformed. ... Theism is on the rise; atheism is in decline. Atheism ... is a philosophy in retreat.

These claims seem to be to be largely hyperbolic. True enough, at least in the United States, there has been a large rise in the number of faith-based colleges offering philosophy programs in the past thirty years. So the numbers of theistic philosophers employed in faith-based colleges have risen. True, too, there are wealthy organisations – such as the Templeton

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<sup>9</sup> <http://philpapers.org/surveys/>



Foundation – offering extensive grant programs to theistic philosophers for projects in philosophy of religion. True, further, there has been a large increase in the number of works – particularly handbooks, companions, and the like – published in philosophy of religion (largely to feed the demand coming from the faith-based colleges). But, despite all of this, as the results of the PhilPapers survey show, the (secular) academy remains heavily dominated by atheists, and, in particular, by naturalists.

Craig and Moreland (2009: ix-x) also write:

The renaissance of Christian philosophy over the last half century has served to reinvigorate natural theology. ... Today, in contrast to just a generation ago, natural theology is a vibrant field of study. All of the various traditional arguments for God's existence, as well as creative new arguments, find prominent, intelligent proponents among contemporary philosophers. Moreover, genuinely new insights have been acquired into traditional problems raised by non-theists such as the problem of evil and the coherence of theism.

These claims are contestable, and contested. True enough, there are many *theists* who think that natural theology is now a vibrant field of study, replete with creative new arguments and new insights. But there are plenty of atheists, naturalists, and irreligionists who hold dissenting opinions. In particular, those who are familiar with the lengthy history of criticism of natural theology by atheists, naturalists and irreligionists are often disposed to say—echoing Tom Flynn—that the allegedly new arguments and new insights have already been adequately criticised by previous generations of atheists, naturalists and irreligionists. Perhaps Craig and Moreland will say—as others do—that those atheists, naturalists and irreligionists who think that there isn't anything really new in contemporary natural theology are simply ignorant of developments in the field; but, again, this reply is contestable and contested.

Setting aside controversial questions about changes in academic philosophy, it seems to me that there is no data that suggests that the worldview of the New Atheists – and the worldviews of atheists, naturalists, and irreligionists in general – is in decline in the West. On the contrary, the census data suggests that, throughout the West, these worldviews are taking a bigger share of the total population as time goes by; and other data suggests that the (secular) academy is a steadfast stronghold for such worldviews.

### **3. Contra-Indications?**

As just noted, the data reported in the previous section suggests that atheism (and naturalism and irreligion) have continued to gain ground in 'advanced industrial nations', and have, at the very least, maintained ground in philosophy departments in the leading academic institutions in those nations. But, despite this data, there are many authors who insist that atheism (and naturalism and irreligion) are in decline. I propose to discuss a couple of

representative examples: Alister McGrath (*The Twilight of Atheism*, 2004) and Gary Bouma (*Australian Soul*, 2006).

McGrath's book is getting on for ten years old. In it, he claims that atheism is in 'a twilight zone' (279):

'The simple fact is that interest in religion has grown globally since the high-water mark of secularism in the 1970s, even in the heartlands of the West. ... This new interest in things spiritual has swept through Western culture in the last decade. ... In what follows, we shall explore ... the observed waning appeal of atheism.' (190-2)

I am not sure how McGrath "observed" the waning appeal of atheism in the years prior to the writing of his book; I am sure that he cannot have made this observation while looking at demographic data. As I noted above, across most countries with higher gross domestic product per capita, there have been steady declines in religious affiliation and religiosity, and steady increases in atheism and agnosticism, over a period of many decades. Moreover, these trends have continued unabated in the time since McGrath's book appeared.

McGrath cites as "telling factors" (a) "the change in direction of the long-running television series *Star Trek*" after Gene Roddenberry's death in 1991 (190); and (b) "the burgeoning bookstore sections dealing with 'Body, Mind and Spirit'" (191). While there are various things that might be said at this point, it is perhaps sufficient to observe that it is consistent with steady increase in atheism and agnosticism, and steady decline in religious affiliation and religiosity, that there have been major shifts in the nature of religiosity. A burgeoning market for material on "Body, Mind and Spirit" is consistent with a burgeoning market for material by atheists and agnostics, and with a shrinking market for more traditional religious publications.<sup>10</sup> Of course, what really matters here is market *share*: given massive increases in population and purchasing power, it is likely that absolute numbers of most types of publications have increased. But there is pretty compelling evidence that material by atheists and agnostics has commanded a bigger share of the market in recent times. Books by Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens and others have sold like hot cakes; who recalls similar best-selling books by atheists and naturalists and irreligionists in the immediately preceding years?

Of course, the case that McGrath makes is not merely empirical: he is also concerned to argue that the intellectual foundations for atheism have collapsed. His argument here has several parts. He claims that the intellectual case against God has stalled: the arguments of Feuerbach, Marx and Freud all presuppose atheism, and so are merely *post hoc* rationalisations (179-82). Moreover, he adds, postmodernism seriously undermines the plausibility of atheism by subjecting it to deconstructive critique (227-37). Next, he suggests

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<sup>10</sup> For other misgivings about adverting to Mind-Body-Spirit literature in this context, see Lee (2007), and references therein.

that the credentials of atheism as political and intellectual liberator have been called into question by the unfolding of history (258-64). Finally, he claims that atheism is wishy-washy and plain unexciting: dull, dated and grey (269-73).

There is much to say in response, and not enough space to go into detail. First, a serious case for atheism would not draw arguments from Feuerbach, Marx and Freud. McGrath is right to say that Feuerbach, Marx and Freud develop theories which presuppose atheism; but the proper response is to look elsewhere for the serious arguments for atheism, naturalism and irreligion. Whatever you might say about the arguments of, say, Mackie (1982) or Sobel (2004), you could not seriously claim that these are just “post hoc rationalisations”. Second, the postmodernist argument that McGrath develops against atheism manifestly works equally well—or equally poorly—against *any* developed worldview, religious or otherwise. Third, it seems implausible that anyone could make out a compelling argument that the credentials of either theism or atheism—religion or irreligion, naturalism or supernaturalism—as political and intellectual liberator is further advanced by the unfolding of history. There are—and always have been—horrors in which religion plays a significant causal role; there are—and always have been—horrors in which secular ideology plays a significant causal role. It seems to me to be an utterly fruitless task to try to argue that, say, the European Wars of Religion reflect more—or less—badly on religion than Stalin’s genocide in the Ukraine does on secular ideology. Fourth, it seems to be a matter of personal taste whether one supposes that theism, religion and supernaturalism are less dull, dated and grey than atheism, irreligion and naturalism. It goes without saying that some forms of atheism, irreligion and naturalism—and, in particular, some institutional forms of atheism, irreligion and naturalism—are dull, dated and grey; but it goes equally without saying that some forms of theism, religion and supernaturalism are dull, dated and grey.

Whether we take McGrath to be making an empirical claim—‘as a matter of fact, atheism and naturalism and irreligion are in decline in the West’—or a normative claim—‘it ought to be the case that atheism, naturalism and irreligion are in decline, because these positions lack both rational justification and intellectual attraction’—it seems pretty clear that there is nothing in his book that comes close to substantiating those claims. On the one hand, the empirical data—both before and after the publication of the book—clearly does not point where he says that it points; and, on the other hand, he fails so much as to engage with serious recent defences of atheism and naturalism and irreligion.

Bouma’s book is a couple of years’ younger than McGrath’s book. In it, he claims that:

An examination of both the qualitative and quantitative aspects of Australia’s religious and spiritual life shows that they have a healthy future. (86) ... The emerging picture of Australia’s religious and spiritual life shows continued vitality. (129) ... Religion and spirituality never engaged everyone’s attention or commitment. I expect, however, that more will in the near future than did in the near past. (206)

Bouma's book contains an extensive discussion of the 2001 census data (the most recent such data at the time of writing and publication). It relies heavily on comparison of the 1996 census data with the 2001 census data, including the following: in 1996, 'no religion' (16.48%), 'atheist' (0.04%), 'agnostic' (0.05%), 'humanist' (0.02%), 'rationalist' (0.01%), 'not stated' (8.67%), 'inadequate description' (0.31%); in 2001, 'no religion' (15.48%), 'atheist' (0.13%), 'agnostic' (0.09%), 'humanist' (0.03%), 'rationalist' (0.01%), 'not stated' (9.78%), 'inadequate description' (1.88%), 'Jedi' (0.4%).

Interestingly, this data shows a *decline* for 'no religion' between 1996 and 2001; but it also shows significant *increases* for 'not stated' and 'inadequate description' (not to mention the new appearance of 'Jedi', and the very large increases for 'atheist' and 'agnostic'). When we look at the census data over a longer period of time—from 1986 through 2011—we see that there is a steady increase in the combined total of 'no religion', 'not stated' and 'inadequate description', a steady increase in 'no religion' *except* for a small decline in 2001, and fluctuation in 'not stated' and 'inadequate'. The most natural interpretation to put on the data, I think, is that a sizeable proportion of the population happily fits into any of 'no religion', 'not stated' and 'inadequate'; the decline in 'no religion' in 2001 simply reflects a larger percentage of respondents happening to place themselves into 'not stated' and 'inadequate'.

Bouma writes: 'The category "not stated" poses an insurmountable problem of interpretation. Some commentators lump these respondents with those who declare they have "no religion"; however, that practice is not justifiable. ... Interpreting a non-response poses serious problems and should be avoided.' (55) I don't think that this is entirely correct. Granted, the census data is a very blunt tool: it doesn't tell us, for example, what percentage of those who say that they belong to a particular religion are actually atheists or agnostics (Jewish atheists, Christian agnostics, and the like). Nonetheless, what the census does clearly show is a steady *decrease* in the percentage of the population that is prepared to tick one of the boxes that is a clear religious identification—Christian (Anglican, Baptist, Catholic, Lutheran, Uniting, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Other), Buddhist, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, Other—and a steady *increase* in the percentage of the population that is prepared to nominate a clearly non-religious identification—Atheist, Agnostic, Humanist, Rationalist.

The census data seems to count strongly against Bouma's prediction that *religion* would gain the attention and commitment of more in the near future: not only has this not happened, there is no indication that it is about to happen. It is less clear what to say about Bouma's prediction that *spirituality* would gain the attention and commitment of more in the near future. Given that Bouma tells us that 'spiritual' refers to 'an experiential journey of encounter and relationship with otherness, with powers, forces and beings beyond the scope of everyday life' (12), it seems a reasonable surmise that atheists, agnostics, humanists and rationalists are not spiritual. But, beyond this, the census tells us nothing about the spirituality of those who fall under 'no religion', 'not stated', and 'inadequate'. If, as Bouma says, interpreting a non-response poses serious problems, then perhaps we ought not to speculate further!

Since this might not otherwise be clear, I add that I do not deny Bouma's claim that Australia's religious and spiritual life shows continued vitality. Some religions and religious denominations are growing; some religions and religious denominations are attracting young people who will lead them into the future. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Baha'i, Druse, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism are all growing (though none is growing as quickly as Atheism or witchcraft). Religion will be a significant influence on social policy for the foreseeable future. But, despite all of this, it remains the case that there is nothing in the data that we have to cast doubt on the claim that, *on average*, Australians continue to become less religious and less spiritual as time goes by.

Perhaps I should also add that Bouma's prediction that there would be more attention and commitment to religion and spirituality in the near future is not grounded solely in census data. On the one hand, he notes the increasing diversity of the Australian population, and the role that faith-based education will play in developing a cohort of religiously articulate young people. And, on the other hand, he claims that religion and spirituality are core to humanity. But, on the one hand, increasing diversity and more faith-based education, while they may contribute to the vitality of religious and spiritual life, are consistent with an *average* decrease in religiosity and spirituality: what we *may* see is an increasingly polar division between a slowly growing group of "nones" and a slowly shrinking group of the religious and the spiritual. And, on the other hand, Bouma's claims about the centrality of religion and spirituality to humanity are *ideological* claims that many "nones" take themselves to have good reasons to reject. Bouma suggests that "secularists and anticlericals" insist that "the mature human stands before the emptiness of space and experiences neither awe nor a sense of wonder, just a non-responsive void" (206), and adds that "an uncaring and unresponsive universe provides little foundation for care for self, other, society or environment". However, on the contrary, most secularists and anti-clericals do think that awe and a sense of wonder are proper responses to our universe (as Dawkins (2006:11) says, 'a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists'); and most secularists and anti-clericals do not suppose that our universe is, itself, the source of the attitudes and values that properly underwrite care for self, other, society and environment (though secularists and anti-clericals disagree with one another about the precise provenance of those attitudes and values).

Of course, McGrath and Bouma are not the only recent authors to claim that religion and spirituality are on the rise in the West; there are many authors making similar claims.<sup>11</sup> However, to the extent that these claims are understood as claims about the percentages of populations in the West that are religious and/or spiritual, it seems pretty clear that they are vulnerable to the same kind of objections that I have raised against McGrath and Bouma. At

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Longman (2006); Mead (2006), Shah and Toft (2006), and Hedges (2007). For critique of these examples, see Paul and Zuckerman (2007).

the time that I write this chapter, it is not open to dispute that census data across the Western world indicates a continuing growth in the percentage of populations in the West that report ‘no religion’, ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’, and the like. Moreover, it is similarly not open to dispute that, a decade ago, when McGrath and Bouma were writing their books, the census data across the Western world indicated a continuing growth in the percentage of populations in the West that report ‘no religion’, ‘atheist’, ‘agnostic’, and the like. Making confident predictions that do not align with the census data would seem to be an activity fraught with peril.

#### 4. Perils of Prediction

Although I have argued that there is no good reason to agree with the predictions of McGrath and Bouma, I have not argued that there is good reason to make contrary predictions. As McGrath and Bouma both observe, there were many academics in the second half of the twentieth century who predicted that religion would have disappeared from the face of the earth as early as the dawn of the new millennium. Those academics were wrong. Across the globe as a whole, there has been no decrease in the percentage of religious believers since those academics made their predictions; and, indeed, there has probably been an increase in the percentage of religious believers over that time.

What is the likely fate of religion and spirituality? Perhaps the most confident prediction that can be made here takes a very long term view. In the far distant future – say,  $10^{130}$  years from now – when protons have decayed, and not even black holes remain, there will not be any believers, religious, spiritual, or otherwise. In that far distant future, the universe will be almost entirely empty, containing nothing but *very* low energy radiation. (For a much fuller description, see Adams and Laughlin (1999).) In the very long term, debate—about religion, or spirituality, or anything else—will certainly cease, and, thereafter, there will be no winners or losers.

When is it likely to be the case that there is no one left alive to debate religion and spirituality? The most pessimistic estimate that I know is given by Rees (2003): in his view, there is a 50% chance that we shall be wiped out before the end of the present century. Whatever the merits of Rees’ estimation, there are certainly many serious threats: global warming, global environmental degradation, global agricultural failure, large-scale nuclear warfare, large-scale biological warfare, large-scale nanotechnological warfare, global financial crisis, and so forth. At the very least, it seems *possible* that it will quite soon be the case that no one is left alive to debate religion, or spirituality, or anything else.

Suppose that, instead of focussing our attention on the end of our history, we turn our attention to our immediate future. What is in store for us in the next five—ten, twenty, fifty—years? Nobody knows. There are many features of our world that are chaotic. Consider, for example, the weather: we cannot make *precise* local predictions of weather across the globe for more than a few hours ahead. There are many features of our world that are

extraordinarily complicated. Consider global warming: we know that the planet is warming up as a result of greenhouse gas emissions; but we cannot say with any certainty how much hotter the planet will be in fifty years. How the immediate future plays out depends upon interactions between many complicated and chaotic features of our world—and this makes prediction of the immediate future immensely fraught.

Earlier, we noted correlations between religiosity and gross domestic product per capita. On the – very big! – assumption that these are projectable correlations, we might suppose that the immediate future of religiosity and spirituality is tied to the immediate future of gross domestic product per capita. If gross domestic product per capita increases across the globe – and, in particular, if more nations achieve the kind of stable economic success that has been seen in the West over the past few decades – then perhaps it is reasonable to suppose that atheism, agnosticism and irreligion will continue to spread. On the other hand, if gross domestic product per capita decreases across the globe – and, in particular, if economic turmoil overtakes even nations in the West – then perhaps it is reasonable to suppose that religiosity and spirituality will become more widespread.

Will gross domestic product per capita increase or decrease in the immediate future? That surely depends upon interactions between many complicated and chaotic features of our world: environmental changes, technological developments, political decisions, demographic shifts, and so forth. Considerations about peak oil, land degradation, climate change, population increase, financial crisis, and such like might underwrite Malthusian pessimism—but, on the other hand, more than two centuries have elapsed since Malthus made his pessimistic observations, and a series of technological advances has so far averted global catastrophe. My own view is that it seems impossible to say, with any confidence, how gross domestic product per capita will fare over the next couple of decades. And so, even if the big assumption is correct—even if there is a projectable correlation between religiosity and gross domestic product per capita—we are still not well-placed to say, with any confidence, how religiosity and spirituality will fare over the next couple of decades.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the considerations to this point are concerned with merely empirical matters: what percentage of the global population *will* be atheists, and/or naturalists, and/or irreligionists, at various points in the near future – five years from now, ten years from now, twenty years from now, and so forth? However, as we have already noted, there are normative matters that also get taken up in discussions of the future of atheism and/or naturalism and/or irreligion: *should* future people be atheists and/or naturalists and/or irreligionists?

Here, there is little of general interest to be said. If we suppose that people ought to believe only what is true, then how we answer the question what people should believe depends upon where we think that the truth lies. If we suppose that people ought to believe only what is

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<sup>12</sup> For a range of predictions about the future of religion, see Davie et al. (2003). Davie notes, quite correctly, that no sociologists of religion predicted the Iranian revolution, or the Rushdie affair, or 9/11; but, of course, sociologists of other domains, and futurologists more generally, have no better track records.

mandated by the evidence that is available to them, then how we answer the question what people ought to believe depends upon what evidence we suppose is available to them. If we suppose that, where it is relevant, people ought to adopt the best expert opinion available to them, then how we answer the question what people ought to believe depends upon what we take to be the best expert opinion available to them. However the immediate future plays out, it is implausible to suppose that there will be convergence of intelligent, informed opinion about where the truth lies, or about what the available evidence is, or about what is the best expert opinion. Normative questions about religion and spirituality are precisely the kinds of questions about which we can reasonably predict that there will forever be reasonable disagreement!

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